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Capital Notebook

Farm Bill Followers Have a Hard, and Wide, Row to Hoe

By Guy Gugliotta
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The 1995 farm bill has marketing loans, milk marketing orders and the Market Promotion Program; loan rates, target prices and flex acres; sodbuster, swampbuster and the wetlands reserve; CRP, ARPs and an EEP.

"It's hard to understand what we say," admitted Randy Green, a senior staffer with the Senate Agriculture Committee. "You must learn to talk about ARPs and EEPs—we tend to confuse people."

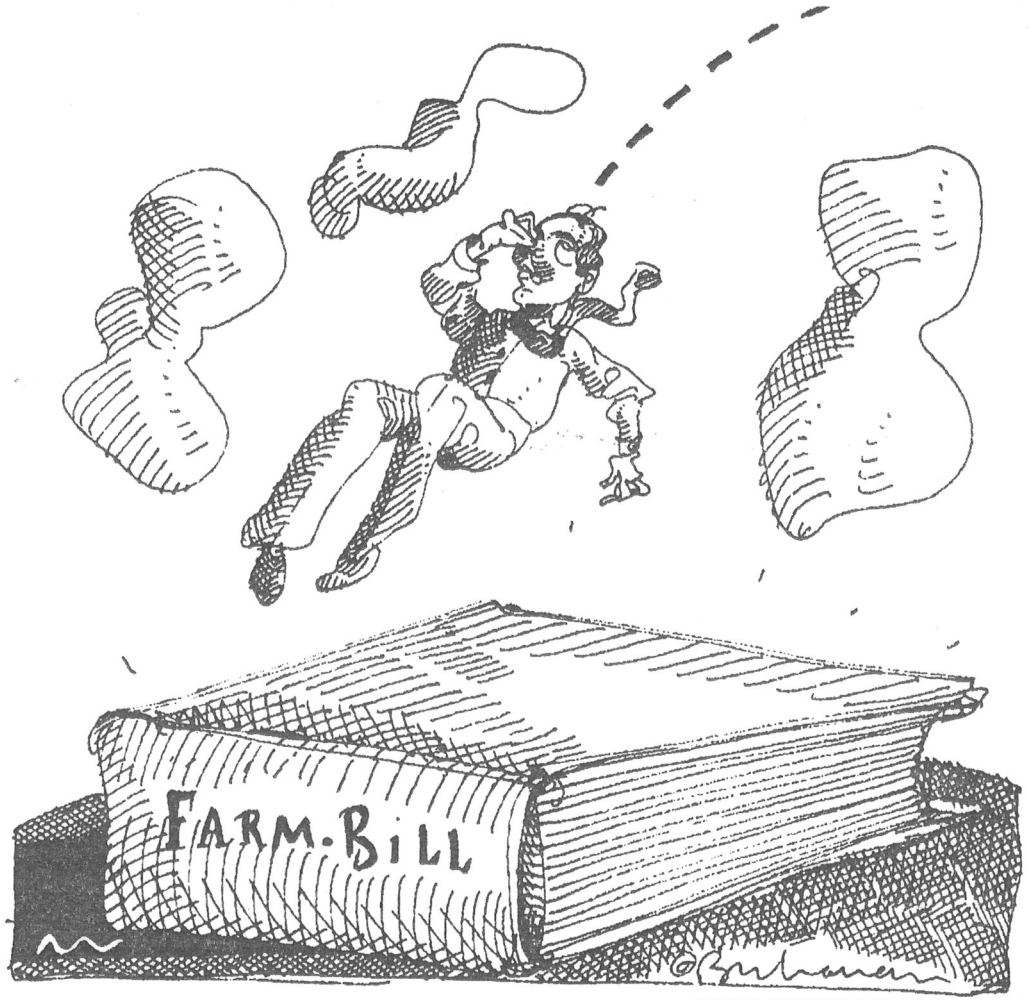
You got that right, Randy. Last week, in hopes of clearing away the fog, the Coalition for a Competitive Food and Agriculture System (mostly agribusiness types) held a seminar for reporters on "How to Cover the 1995 Farm Bill." The short answer is, hold your nose and jump.

Most experienced ag reporters disdained the meeting, leading to the paranoid conclusion that The Washington Post was the only paper that had assigned a moron to cover the bill.

Still, one could take solace by recalling a question about the dairy program posed to then Agriculture Secretary-designate Dan Glickman at his confirmation hearing early this year. Dairy is the Pluto of farm programs—the last step before outer space.

Glickman, a Kansan deep into wheat and steers, said he hadn't paid much attention to dairy in the past but promised to study hard. In other words, *he didn't know, and he said so!*

The first seminar speaker was Jasper Womach of the Congressional Research Service, a cheerful fellow with a ponytail who studies the farm bill for



BY YVONNE BUCHANAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

a living and has managed to reach middle age.

Basically, he said, the farm bill is a monster. The last one, written in 1990, was 750 single-spaced pages long, about the same size, shape and weight as the World Almanac.

The farm bill is made up of several dozen separate laws, some with catchy titles such as the U.S. Grain Standards Act of 1916 and the Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921. Every five years or so, Congress amends everything and throws it together in one big "omnibus bill."

The reason for omnibus bills, Womach explained, is so Congress can get several thousand different interest groups to support them, thus ensuring passage. There are only 2 million farmers left in the United States, so the farm bill is not just about farming.

It is also about fertilizer, food stamps, clean water, tractors, supermarkets, fast-food chains, migratory birds, steamships, erosion, the Third World, tariffs, insurance, housing, banks, bovine growth hormone, E. coli and the Forest Service.

Farm legislators vote for the farm bill because it gives farmers money. Urban legislators vote for it because it protects food programs. Environmentalist legislators vote for it because it links subsidies to prudent land use.

Everybody is supposed to get something, and everybody loses a little. This is why the farm bill is the emperor of congressional log-rolling. Farm legislators will vote for anything you want between farm bills, but they expect your vote when they need it, even if it hurts.

And pain, according to the coalition seminar, is the central farm bill theme this year. Congressional budget cutters have told the ag committees to cut $13.4 billion from farm programs over seven years, down to $66.9 billion.

This is serious money, and there are several ways to save it, said business executive J. B. Penn, a longtime student of farm programs. Most likely is to continue the existing farm program trend by drastically dropping subsidies and getting rid of entitlements to rich farmers.

Or, Congress could adopt a gradual phaseout, either by cutting crop subsidies to zero in five years, or by abandoning most programs and simply paying farmers $43 billion over seven years.

Or, it could change the program structure completely by altering the loan structure, guaranteeing farmers a fixed payment or keying payments exclusively to environmental performance.

Finally, Congress could get stalemated and just forget the whole thing—go "cold turkey" in 1995. This doesn't seem likely, Penn finished, except that the budget bite has made the traditional coalition members a little snappish with each other.

Consumers and candy makers are tired of the sugar program (artificially high prices), greens don't want to risk bringing a lot of marginal land back into production (reducing the acreage covered by the Conservation Reserve Program)and city folks don't like capping food stamps.

In short, we aren't all friends here. Penn said choice one (continuation) seems the best bet since "it's easier to extend what you have," but even if this occurs, 1995 could well be the last farm bill ever.

Hard to imagine life without ARPs and EEPs.